

DEPARTMENT OF MODERN LANGUAGES  
AND CULTURAL STUDIES

<https://uofa.ualberta.ca/modern-languages-and-cultural-studies>

2021-2022 WRITE 399/MLCS 399 StoryLab: Theory and Practice in Nonfiction Narrative  
(Fall Term)

Instructor: Russell Cobb

Time: 9:30-10:50TR

Office: 409 C, Old Arts Bldg.

Place: HC 2-37

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or by appointment

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**Course Prerequisite:** N/A

**Course-based Ethics Approval in place regarding all research projects that involve human testing, questionnaires, etc.?**

Yes       No, not needed, no such projects approved

**Community Service Learning Component:**

None

**Past or Representative Evaluative Course Material Available**

- Exam registry – Students' Union  
<http://www.su.ualberta.ca/services/infolink/exams>
- See explanations below
- Document distributed in class
- Other (please specify)
- NA

**Course Description:**

It has been said we live in a “post-truth world,” and yet the hunger for true stories, artfully told, remains as strong as ever. This course has two objectives: one, to interrogate the notion of truth in nonfiction media, and, two, to produce one work on narrative nonfiction of the student’s interest. A significant aspect of this course involves laboratory work: playing around with audiovisual platforms and workshopping prose. A variety of platforms for storytelling will be explored (magazine writing, documentary film, standup, podcasting, TED-style talks) and students will, by the end of the course, produce one significant, polished work of nonfiction storytelling.

**Course format:** Lectures, discussions, and activities in class. Substantial reading and writing outside of class.

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**Objectives.** Successful students will be able to do the following:

- Understand how notions of truth in nonfiction have evolved over time.
- Recognize the stylistic differences between different genres of nonfiction storytelling: blogging, podcasting, journalism, etc.
- Improve writing and research skills in scholarly and popular modes of writing
- Produce a work of depth as a public humanities project

**Texts:**

- Everything is hosted on eClass. There are sections of books, articles, podcasts, etc. It is highly recommended you print out the readings, or, at the very least, **DO NOT TRY TO COMPLETE THEM ON YOUR PHONE.**

**Important Dates:** [See Academic Schedule in current Calendar](#)

First Day of Class: September 1, 2021

Add/Delete Date: September 15, 2021

50% Withdrawal Date: October 4, 2021

Withdrawal Date: November 30, 2021

Last Day of Class: December 7, 2021

Final Exam Date (if applicable): None

**Grade Distribution (see “Explanatory Notes”):**

- Term Work 100% No final exam

**Explanatory Notes on Assignments:**

**1. Writing journal (25%)**

Students are to submit a journal entry of 250-350 words, roughly once a week, that reacts to readings and generates discussion. Check Daily Work Schedule for prompts. On the weeks an assignment is due, the reading journal will not be due. Create one Google Doc and label it “Last name, First Name, Story Lab Reading Journal.”

One Google Doc will serve as your portfolio to all your informal writing during the term. If your reading journal is not completed by class time on the due date, late penalties will apply (see below for details).

**2. Class Participation (10%)**

This grade evaluates physical presence in class as well as engagement with discussion and lecture. For example, if you don't even bother to bring our texts to class, this grade will suffer. Students will evaluate their performance on the last day of class. "80% of life is showing up"

### **3. Final project: 60%. Broken down as follows**

1. Pitch two possible story ideas on **October 5** (10%)
2. Write a scene for one of the stories **October 19** (10%)
3. Develop background context for story with annotated bibliography **November 4** (10%)
4. Deep dive into at least one unique primary source **November 18** (10% )
5. \*optional: rough draft for comments **November 30** (no credit but recommended)
6. Pull it all together into a final draft **December 9** (20%)

### **4. Presentation of stories 5%**

Last week of class, students will have 5-7 minutes to read a bit of their story and show whatever media they deem appropriate. A strict time limit will apply. December 2 & 7 reserved for presentations.

### **Required Notes:**

Policy about course outlines can be found in the [Evaluation Procedures and Grading System](#) of the University Calendar.

### **Student Responsibilities:**

#### ***Academic Integrity:***

The University of Alberta is committed to the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Students are expected to be familiar with these standards regarding academic honesty and to uphold the policies of the University in this respect. Students are particularly urged to familiarize themselves with the provisions of the [Code of Student Behaviour](#) and avoid any behaviour that could potentially result in suspicions of cheating, plagiarism, misrepresentation of facts and/or participation in an offence. Academic dishonesty is a serious offence and can result in suspension or expulsion from the University.

All students should consult [the Academic Integrity website](#). If you have any questions, ask your instructor.

An instructor or coordinator who is convinced that a student has handed in work that he or she could not possibly reproduce without outside assistance is obliged, out of consideration of fairness to other students, to report the case to the Associate Dean of the Faculty. See the [Academic Discipline Process](#).

#### ***Recording of Lectures:***

Students may record lectures in any format they see fit, as long as it is 1. For study purposes only, and 2. Not distributed beyond the class for any reason.

#### ***Attendance, Absences, and Missed Grade Components:***

Regular daily attendance is essential for optimal performance. In cases of potentially

excusable absences due to illness or domestic affliction, notify your instructor by e-mail. Regarding absences that may be excusable and procedures for addressing course components missed as a result, consult sections 23.4.2 and 23.4.3 of the University Calendar. Be aware that unexcused absences will result in partial or total loss of the grade for the “attendance and participation” component(s) of a course, as well as for any assignments that are not handed-in or completed as a result. In this course, more than three unexcused absences will result in an automatic lower letter grade for the class participation component for each absence above three.

***Policy for Late Assignments:***

Students who consult in advance with an instructor regarding contingencies preventing the timely completion of an assignment may, at the discretion of the instructor, be granted an extension. Otherwise, assignments may be handed in one class-day after the stated deadline, with a 10%-per-class-day penalty assessed for each class-day of lateness. **Let me put this in a very-straightforward way: there will be no extensions granted AFTER the deadline. Period.**

***Disclaimer:***

Any typographical errors in this syllabus are subject to change and will be announced in class and posted on eClass. The date of the final examination is set by the Registrar and takes precedence over the final examination date reported in this syllabus.

**Student Resources:**

The best all-purpose website for student services is: <https://www.ualberta.ca/current-students>.

[The Academic Success Centre](#) provides professional academic support to help students maximize their academic success and achieve their academic goals. We offer appointments, advising, group workshops, online courses, and specialized programming year-round to students in all university programs, and at all levels of achievement and study.

They also administer the University of Alberta’s [Duty to Accommodate procedure](#) for students and works with students, instructors, campus units, Faculties and departments, community and government agencies, and on and off-campus service providers to coordinate students’ disability-related accommodation needs for participation in university programs.

For general information and to register for services visit the [Academic Accommodations](#) webpage.

[The Centre for Writers](#) offers free one-on-one writing support to students, faculty, and staff. Students can request consultation for a writing project at any stage of development. Instructors can request class visits and presentations.

[The First Peoples' House](#) provides an environment of empowerment for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners to achieve personal and academic growth.

[Health and Wellness Support for Students](#) outlines available mental and physical health resources that are offered on-campus and in the community.

[The Office of the Student Ombuds](#) is a confidential service that strives to ensure that

university processes related to students operate as fairly as possible. We offer information, advice, and support to students, faculty, and staff as they deal with academic, discipline, interpersonal, and financial issues related to student programs.

**Learning and working environment:**

The Faculty of Arts is committed to ensuring that all students, faculty and staff are able to work and study in an environment that is safe and free from discrimination and harassment. It does not tolerate behaviour that undermines that environment.

It is the policy of the University of Alberta that sexual violence committed by any member of the University community is prohibited and constitutes misconduct. Resources and more information can be found at <https://www.ualberta.ca/campus-life/sexual-violence>

The University of Alberta acknowledges that we are located on Treaty 6 territory, and respects the histories, languages, and cultures of the First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and all First Peoples of Canada, whose presence continues to enrich our vibrant community.

Policy about course outlines can be found in the [Evaluation Procedures and Grading System](#) section of the University Calendar.

**Grading:**

Assessment of the individual course components may be in the form of numerical marks or letter grades. The final letter grade will be based on "a combination of absolute achievement and relative performance in a class" (University Calendar, [Evaluation Procedures and Grading System](#)). The University Grading Procedure mandates that "a student’s level of achievement of the goals/outcomes of a course, their grade, and the descriptor of that grade must be aligned" (<https://policiesonline.ualberta.ca/>). The following guidelines have been adopted by the Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies:

**“MLCS Undergraduate Grading Scale”**

Descriptor	Letter Grade	Grade Point Value	%
Excellent. A+, A or A- is earned by work which is superior in content and form and demonstrates an exceptional grasp of the subject matter. The grade of A+ designates work that far exceeds course expectations. Grades in the A range are normally achieved by a small number of students.	A+	4.0	95-
	A	4.0	100
	A-	3.7	90-
			94
			86-
			89

<p>Good. B+, B or B- is earned by work that demonstrates a thorough comprehension of the course material and a good command of relevant skills. Grades in the B range are normally achieved by the largest number of students.</p>	B+	3.3	82-
	B	3.0	85
	B-	2.7	75-
			81 70- 74
<p>Satisfactory. C+, C or C- is earned by work that demonstrates an adequate grasp of the course material and relevant skills. Grades in the C range designate work that has met the basic requirements of the course.</p>	C+	2.3	66-
	C	2.0	69
	C-	1.7	61-
			65 58- 60
<p>Poor/Minimal Pass. D+ or D is earned by work that demonstrates minimal familiarity with the course material. Grades in the D range generally indicate insufficient preparation for subsequent courses in the subject matter.</p>	D+	1.3	55-
	D	1.0	57
			50- 54
<p>Failure.</p>	F	0.0	0-49

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Thursday, September 2

In class:

Introduction to the course:

The Art of Fact? Factual literature? Literary nonfiction? Combining the literary and the empirically proven in the age of Fake News and Alternative Facts

1. Post-truth age?

2. Aristotelian division between the Poet and the Historian
3. What is a fact? What is "the literary"?
4. Introductions: tell one fact about yourself and one fiction. Let's see if we can guess which is fact and which is fiction.
5. Emphasize theory but also practice....one significant work of creative nonfiction by the end of class

What's due:

- Nothing!

## Tuesday, September 7

In-class:

- More on the theoretical basis of the course. Discuss Porter and the implications of social media on narrating the self. More about the course for newcomers.
- Set up Google Drive for collaborative writing. Reacting to prompts.

What's due:

- "Rewriting the Self," Roy Porter (Google Drive)
  - Is Western history a linear progression toward the individual self? Or is this a myth?

## Thursday, September 9

In-class:

- Continue discussing the relationship between Facts, Truth, and Literature
- Emphasize that this course is about developing a piece of Literature as Fact
- Break into groups and discuss how the Internet relates to the authentic self.

What's due:

- Jia Tolentino, "The I in Internet" (eClass)
- **Reading journal #1**: What are some of the ways that you narrativize yourself? Reflect the ideas in the essay and social media.

## Tuesday, September 14

In-class:

- Writing about yourself vs. writing about others
  - Ethical considerations

What's due:

- Janet Malcolm, "The Journalist and the Murderer"
  - What are some of the ethical considerations raised by the McGinniss and MacDonald controversy?

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## Thursday, September 16

Terminology, genre, and ethics, cont.

In class:

- Lecture/Discuss differences between memoir, lyric essay, reporting, etc.
- Look at examples...try to define “consciousness” and “literature”

What’s due:

- Phillip Lopate, *To Show and to Tell*, pp. 7-22, introduction and chapter 1 (eClass)
- **Reading Journal #2:** Lopate says that nonfiction writers have “fiction envy” and that in the university, fiction and poetry are considered “true” creative genres, while nonfiction is dismissed. Do you agree? Why do you think reported literature has less prestige than imaginative literature?

## Tuesday, September 21

In-class:

- Reporting and researching: first steps.
- Discuss research vs. reporting. Academic v. Popular. They are not all that different: should be curiosity-driven, a desire to find out more about something.

What’s due:

- Gutkind, *You Can’t Make This Up*, pp. 61-82
- Write an immersive experience in which you will write everything you see, hear, feel, touch, and smell. Plan for this because it will be your reading journal assignment #3 on Thursday.

## Thursday, September 23

In-class:

- The back and forth between reporting, researching, and “consciousness” in Di Cintio
- Discuss immersive journalism experiment in **Reading Journal #3, which is DUE TODAY.**

What’s due:

- Fragment of Marcello Di Cintio’s *Driven: The Secret Lives of Cabbies* on eClass

## Tuesday, September 28

In-class:

- “It’s all in the pitch.” Discuss Part I of the final assignment.
- Workshop pitches.
- Reminders about what makes a good story

What’s due:

- Read “How to Successfully Pitch the New York Times”
- Bring one or two rough story ideas to class

Thursday, September 30

National Day for Truth and Reconciliation

Tuesday, October 5

In-class:

- Talk about pitches in class
- Learn from the masters: Ira Glass, Lopate, Coates

What's due:

- Part I of final project: The Pitch (see eClass)

Thursday, October 7

Elephant =-----FOCUS ON SCENE

Reading:

- Jana Pruden, *After the Fire*

Do: Read the writer's article. Dig around on the internet, and come up with three pointed questions to ask the writer.

- Someone please ask her why we are so obsessed with "true crime"!
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Week 6

Monday, October 7

Case study: S-Town podcast

Read/Listen:

- [S-town, Chapter 1](#)

- Aja Romano, “S-town is a stunning podcast. It probably shouldn’t have been made.”  
<https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/3/30/15084224/s-town-review-controversial-podcast-privacy>

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## Friday, October 25

Guest speaker: Omar Moullem

Read:

- Read two pieces by Omar Moullem on eClass

Do:

- Prepare four questions for guest.

## Monday, November 25

Guest speaker: Jesse Lipscombe

Prepare:

- Watch Jesse’s TED Talk, and prepage four questions for him.
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwuGtrG6NMU&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR0NZtl1i-TVjo1FvAP-e3zToH7wlFAV72miGYEmfR3aN4hcGMwHVmlEWw>

In-class:

- Presentations on stories.

What’s due:

- The presentations!

December 9, 5:00pm

Absolute last day to turn in written version of project